1: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

RITUAL STRUCTURE

5. RELIGION IN DISEASE AND DIFFICULTY

In the two preceding sections an attempt has been made to present the ritual cycle of the community covering firstly the festivals and ceremonies within a normal calendar year, and secondly, the rites and observances concerning the major crises of life. These cycles are rigidly observed, as their observance constitutes the *dharma* or the appropriate way of life, and leads to the prosperity and well-being of the family as well as to a desirable future for the individual after death. With the exception of these festivals, under normal conditions of life, there is very little spiritual or devotional activity in the community. But persistent difficulties, uncommon diseases, and frequent deaths turn the people's thoughts to supernatural factors; events are interpreted in terms of supernatural interferences, and are sought to be remedied by magico-religious procedures.

Most of the common diseases are interpreted as a 'fault in the physical system', and are treated with herbal medicines or modern drugs obtained from the dispensary. Common colds, headaches, fever, stomach-ache, scabies, gonorrhoea and syphilis are regarded as natural diseases, and an effort is made to cure them with medicines. But persistent headaches, intermittent fevers, continued stomach disorders, rickets and other wasting diseases among children, menstrual troubles, repeated abortions, etc., are attributed to supernatural forces. In all such cases medicinal cures as well as propitiation of the 'unseen powers' are attempted simultaneously. Similarly, such calamities as the failure of crops, total blindness, repeated failures in undertakings, deaths of children in quick succession and too many deaths in the family within a short time are taken to indicate 'misfortune' and 'the handiwork of malevolent supernatural forces'. Smallpox, cholera and plague are always attributed to the wrath of various goddesses. For these diseases worship is regarded as the only remedy; and no medicines are administered to the patients.

What are the major factors that cause these difficulties, distresses and deaths? In the village community they are attributed to one or more of the following:

(i) The wrath of ancestor-spirits.
(ii) Unfavourable stars.
(iii) Ghosts and spirits.
(iv) The wrath of gods.
(v) Black magic and witchcraft.

RITUAL STRUCTURE

769 If ancestor-spirits are ignored and 'not given their due' they
753 warn the family by causing some minor—but noticeable—trouble. It is for the members of the family to take this 'timely warning' and remove the cause of the ancestors' anger. Failure in this often leads to serious consequences and irreparable losses. Ill-luck and misfortunes persist all along the way of a person whose 'stars are unfavourable'. Hysteria, fits and 'possession by spirits' are the result of hostility of spirits and ghosts. The village goddesses are known for their violent temperament and retaliate quickly and severely, even for minor offences against them. The all-India gods are comparatively pacific; and punish people only for 'gross disrespect' shown towards them. Enmity may lead to the use of black magic or witchcraft, which may be the root cause of the trouble in many cases of persistent disease and ill-luck.

755 Most of the cases need the diagnosis of a specialist. Sometimes the ancestor-spirits convey their anger in dreams to some member of the family. Often the ghost possessing an individual reveals its identity through its victim. But in other cases a proper diagnosis is necessary. Why is the ancestor-spirit angry? What should be done to pacify it? How could the evil influence of unlucky stars be averted? Only the Brahmin or a local seer can answer these questions. For undoing the evil influence of spirits and ghosts the services of a competent specialist must be sought. Similarly, the hostile magician or witch must be matched by a more powerful magician.

[767] The ancestor-spirits are not very difficult to please. When the cause of their anger is known, an apology followed by worship is often enough to appease them. Fasting, repentance and food offerings are generally enough to please the gods. Goddesses are more difficult, and require the sacrifice of a fowl or goat. Unfavourable stars require fasting, worship and certain ceremonies following the recommendations of the Brahmin. The giving of alms to the Brahmin and the poor generally follows these ceremonies. Several different techniques can be employed to keep ghosts and spirits in check, and for counteracting black magic and witchcraft. As far as possible, 'all the reasonable demands of a ghost should be fulfilled', but if it still persists in its mischief 'it should be tied down' and 'kept in captivity'. Against sorcery and witchcraft drastic steps are required. For action under both these categories, i.e. against ghosts, as well as against black magic and witchcraft, three